

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued weekly. Subscription price \$2.50 per year. Entered as second class matter at the N. Y. Post Office by STREET & SMITH.

No. 216.

Price 5 Cents.

A CONFESSION BY MISTAKE OR A HELPING HAND TO AN UNWILLING PRISONER



BY THE AUTHOR OF
NICK CARTER—

"ARRESTED IN THE ACT, MY MAN," SAID THE GREAT DETECTIVE, STERNLY.

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*Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1901 by Street & Smith, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress,
Washington, D. C.*

Issued weekly.

*Entered as second class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office.
Subscription price, \$2.50 per year.*

February 16, 1901,

No. 216. STREET & SMITH, Publishers. NEW YORK. 238 William St., N. Y. 5 Cents.

A Confession by Mistake; OR, A HELPING HAND TO AN UNWILLING PRISONER.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

"I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY."

It was exactly ten o'clock in the evening of a late winter's day that a hurried call was sent to the police station at Baltimore.

A man had been found murdered in the extensive garden behind his palatial residence on the outskirts of the city.

The man's name was Oscar Brownlie, and he was commonly reported to be worth a round million.

The body was found by a coachman, Jefferson Jens, by name, who stumbled over it in the dark while on his way from the stable to the house.

Jens was so frightened by his discovery that he could hardly tell the sad news. He simply pulled his fellow-workers from the kitchen and pointed to the corpse as it lay on its back, stiff and cold.

The butler, a more cool-headed fellow, caught up the body and took it into the

house, where it was laid on a couch. All saw at once that not a single spark of life remained.

A telephone call to headquarters soon brought a policeman and a local detective to the scene, and the entire household and grounds were placed under guard.

Oscar Brownlie had been murdered in a very peculiar way, so peculiar, in fact, that for some time not one of those who attempted to solve the case could bring the exact method to light.

The coroner, who was also a doctor, admitted that the man had been poisoned, that his system had been actually shocked to death by the action of the drug used. Whatever the stuff was had acted largely upon the blood, which in turn had acted on the heart and caused death.

Oscar Brownlie was an old bachelor. For years he had lived in the mansion alone, surrounded by half a dozen faithful servants.

He was commonly known as a musical instrument crank, and spent his time in examining and purchasing old and rare violins, flutes, and the like, of which he had a music-room in the mansion stocked full.

This collection alone was known to be worth about eighty thousand dollars.

For the past six months there had lived with the old man an only nephew, Ralph Larchmond, the son of a younger sister. Ralph, twenty years of age, had been left an orphan with but a few dollars and a good many expensive habits.

Old Oscar Brownlie did not care much to have him with him, but he owed it to his sister's memory to give her son a home, and so invited Ralph, who was glad to accept the offer.

Just previously Ralph had finished up a course at Princeton College (he had been living with his mother in Camden, New Jersey), and was looking for an opening to study law. Brownlie easily obtained for him a position in the offices of Streep, Gadwin & Victor, and this the young man occupied at the time of his uncle's death.

It was known by every member of the household that Ralph and his uncle were not on very good terms.

They had had a quarrel, and Ralph was preparing to leave the mansion and take rooms in a boarding-house in the center of the city when his uncle's death occurred.

When the body was found, Ralph was not at home, having left the mansion, so it was supposed by the servants, immediately after dinner, which was served regularly at half-past six.

The first thought of the coachman was that the old man had committed suicide, but it was soon found that he had been robbed of everything his pockets had contained.

Why Brownlie had gone into the garden

at that time of the night was another mystery, excepting that he might have taken a sudden notion to visit the stable to look at the horses, one of which had the day previous gone lame.

Lannigan, the local detective, at once began to question Jefferson Jens concerning himself, and so frightened the colored man that Jens lost his head entirely.

"It wasn't me, sah, 'deed it wasn't! I wouldn't touch a hair ob Massa Brownlie's head, sah!"

"Well, if you were in the stables you must have seen somebody around the place or in the garden."

Thus approached, Jens didn't know but what he had seen a man prowling round, a man with a long ulster and a slouch hat. But that was as far as Jens would go, even to clear himself.

Lannigan then made inquiries as to Ralph Larchmond, and learned that Larchmond was in the habit of wearing a long ulster.

This caused him to suspect Ralph, and from one of the servants he learned about the quarrel and how the young man was preparing to move away.

That very evening he called on Streep, the lawyer, the head of the firm for which Ralph worked, and learned that Ralph was his uncle's principal heir.

"As clear as a diamond," said Lannigan to himself.

"Young Larchmond is guilty beyond a doubt.

"He was afraid that after that quarrel, his uncle would take it into his head to disinherit him.

"So he took time by the forelock and put the old man out of the way.

"Robbing Brownlie's pockets was simply a blind to make the deed look like the work of an ordinary robber or cut-throat.

"He is an extravagant young chap, and

the thought of being left poor nerved his hand to strike the blow—or, rather, to dose his uncle to death.

“Now, that being settled, the thing is to fasten the crime upon him.”

And having thus reasoned out matters to suit himself, this over-confident detective went to work to gather in proofs against Ralph.

The nephew of the murdered man turned up at the mansion at half-past twelve.

On hearing that his uncle was dead all of the color forsook his face, and for the moment it looked as if he was about to faint away.

But he recovered, and at once demanded to know the particulars of the dastardly deed. As far as they were known they were given him, and then he himself was questioned.

He had but little to say. He said he had been out of town, but did not mention the name of the place to which he had gone.

This in itself was to Lannigan very suspicious, and as soon as the young man left the mansion early in the morning, Lannigan started in to examine his effects, having gotten a search warrant for that purpose.

At first he could find but little in Ralph's trunks, which were all packed ready for removal.

But soon he came upon several slips of paper which interested him greatly.

“Ha! I knew it!” he cried softly to himself. “Lannigan, you are a brick. No detective alive is in it with you. He is guilty and here are the proofs.”

He placed the slips of paper in an envelope and continued his search, which a moment later resulted in the finding of a somewhat crumpled pawn ticket.

The ticket was on a pawnbroking establishment in Washington, and Lannigan took down the number and address.

That day the papers came out with a full account of the tragedy, and a dozen theories

concerning the doing of the deed were advanced. Half a dozen men began to work on the case, and to mention all of the clues these people thought they found would alone make a story.

Jans was placed under temporary arrest, and so was the butler, who had been the last person in the mansion to see Brownlie alive. All of the other servants were closely watched.

At the end of the two days the police had four tramps in custody, under suspicion of having committed the crime. But a second examination of these fellows resulted in all of them being able to prove alibis.

Then came an announcement that caused several of the daily papers to issue extras. Ralph Larchmond had been arrested for the crime.

In large and leaded type the papers told of Detective Lannigan's remarkable work on the case. How he had suspected Ralph from the start and made many damaging discoveries concerning his habits, etc. More than this, Lannigan had traced the whole course of the great crime, the details of which, however, were not to be given out until the trial.

Ralph Larchmond was greatly excited over his arrest, but once in a cell, he calmed down. He refused himself to all visitors but one, a former college chum, Paul Becker, by name.

These two held a private conference which lasted over an hour. Then Becker left the jail, and did not return until the afternoon of the following day.

Evidently he brought discouraging news, for a few minutes after he arrived, Ralph Larchmond fainted dead away. A hospital doctor was called in, but it was a long time before the young man revived.

When he did so he spent much time over a letter that had been brought him by his

friend, in whose care it had been addressed. It was written in a coarse hand, but evidently that of a woman.

For a long while Larchmond considered this letter, but finally he tore it to bits, and not content with this, chewed up such scraps as contained any writing.

The firm for which he worked were divided among themselves as to the question of giving him assistance. Streep was inclined to believe him guilty, Gadwin was non-committal, and Victor professed his belief in the young man's innocence.

But when Victor called just before the matter came up for examination Ralph Larchmond sent word out, begging to be excused, and stating he wished no lawyer until he knew the particulars of the charge against him.

A week later a true bill was brought in against Ralph Larchmond charging him with murder in the first degree. He pleaded not guilty, and the case was set down for immediate hearing. Of course, the courtroom was crowded and long before the opening of the trial the door had to be closed against those outside.

It was well along in the afternoon when the examination of the young man began.

Almost the first thing brought out by the prosecution were the slips which Lannigan had found in one of Larchmond's trunks.

These slips, three in number, were read aloud, examined by both judge and jury, and then handed for safe keeping to the court clerk.

The slips read as follows:

"Try old Davy for a hypodermic syringe."

"A thousand dollars by the 14th."

"Get letters by all means—otherwise not safe."

After it had been proved where the slips had been found Ralph Larchmond was asked to explain concerning them.

"I have nothing to say," was his reply.

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing."

This in itself created a sensation, but even a greater one was to follow.

Lannigan was called to testify as to the pawn ticket. He said he had traced the matter up and learned that the ticket represented a watch which Larchmond had put in pawn in Washington on the very night of the murder.

"He did this to obtain money, so that he could show folks that he was not in need. The watch brought him eighty dollars. It was a fine affair and belonged to Oscar Brownlie."

At the announcement that he had gone to Washington on the very evening of the murder every one looked at Ralph Larchmond, thinking this a good chance for the young man to attempt an alibi.

They were dumfounded to see Larchmond suddenly stagger to his feet with a face from which every particle of color had fled.

"There is no use to go on with this case any longer," he said, in a low tone, addressing the judge. "I retract my former plea and plead guilty."

"You plead guilty?" shouted a dozen voices at once.

"Yes, I plead guilty, gentlemen. I did not wish—— But I will say no more. I plead guilty, and that ought to be enough."

"Ralph!"

It was his one friend, Paul Becker, who had started forward. At the sound of Becker's voice Larchmond put up his hand.

"Not a word, Paul."

"But—but——"

"Remember."

Ralph Larchmond looked straight into his former chum's eyes as he spoke. Becker turned red, coughed, appeared irresolute for a second, and then with bent head slipped back into his seat.

By this time the court-room was in an uproar, which judge and constables found themselves unable to quell.

Amid much excitement Ralph Larchmond's new plea was taken down.

Sentence was deferred, pending the straightening out of this unusual case, and then the jury was dismissed. Ralph Larchmond was taken back to jail by the sheriff. Here Paul Becker tried to see him, but in vain.

Lannigan was in high feather. He had brought a murderer to justice and he felt that he was entitled to rank with the leading detectives of the land.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE COMMUNICATION FOR NICK CARTER.

On the following morning Nick Carter sat in his office, smoking a Havana cigar, busily engaged in looking over his early mail.

On the opposite side of the room sat Chick, his first assistant, making up several reports to be handed to the Police Superintendent.

"Well, here's the oddest letter yet, Chick," remarked Nick, slowly, as his eyes traveled over a sheet he held in his hand.

"Where from?" asked Chick, without raising his head.

"Baltimore."

"They want you to take up that Oscar Brownlie murder case, I'll bet a new hat."

"Whom do you mean by they, Chick?"

"Oh, perhaps the young man himself."

"That shows you haven't read the papers this morning, my boy."

"Why, what was in the papers? Is the trial ended already?"

"Ralph Larchmond retracted his former plea and pleaded guilty."

"Humph! Then it's not the Brownlie case at all."

"Yes, it is. Listen to this."

And Nick read aloud as follows:

"MR. NICHOLAS CARTER, New York City—

"Dear Sir: Although I am an utter stranger to you, I feel that you will give this communication your close attention. I hope with all my heart that you will conclude to do as I desire when you have thought the matter over.

"I wish you to take up the Oscar Brownlie murder case and prove the innocence of Ralph Larchmond. He has made a confession, but he is not guilty, that I am willing to swear.

"I am placed in such a position that I cannot reveal myself to you, and if you go to Larchmond I hope it will be with the understanding that you will not let him know that you were hired by some unknown outsider.

"There is a detective, here named Lannigan who brought in all the evidence against Larchmond before he confessed. Perhaps he told the truth so far as he knew, perhaps he did not. I will leave that for you to find out.

"If I dared I would come to you. But I dare not. Yet I swear Ralph Larchmond is innocent, and that I had nothing whatever to do with the crime, nor do I know how it was committed.

"To show you how much in earnest I am I enclose with this letter a one-hundred-dollar bill. I know this amount is but a trifle to you, but perhaps you will appreciate it when I tell you it is every cent I possess, and was raised partly in a pawnshop. Before the year is out I will come into a little property, and if you will clear Larchmond I will promise to pay you whatever your services are worth.

"Now, please do not cast this aside, as the communication of a crank. I am in earnest, Mr. Carter, and if you will save Ralph Larchmond you will have saved an innocent man, and one who would rather die than cast dishonor on himself and those around him.

"Yours in hope and despair,

"RALPH LARCHMOND'S FRIEND."

"What do you think of that, Chick?"

"Is the one-hundred-dollar bill there, Nick?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then it's certainly the strangest thing yet."

"The writer makes me take the case. I can't return his money, even if I wished to."

"You take it for granted the writer is a man, I see."

"Yes, the whole tone of the letter would seem to prove that, and the writing is that of a man, although a good attempt has been made to disguise the hand."

"Well, what will you do?"

Nick drummed on the desk with his fingers for several minutes before replying.

"I think I'll go down to Baltimore before I answer that question," he said, finally.

"To interview Ralph Larchmond?"

"Yes."

"But the papers said all along he refused to see detectives and lawyers."

"Perhaps I can get him to change his mind on that score. If I can't I'll look over the ground where the murder was committed and interview that coachman and the others."

"And then?"

"You'll either see me back here inside of twenty-four hours or else I'll telegraph to you," concluded Nick.

A few more words passed concerning the cases to be disposed of, and then the great detective started to take the first step in the case that was destined to be the strangest on record.

His trip to Baltimore occupied the best part of the day, but five o'clock found Nick at the jail. He knew the sheriff very well, and soon related to that official the object of his visit.

"It will do no good, Carter. He won't talk to you."

"Well, I'll have to talk to him, then."

The sheriff at once led the way to the cell in which Ralph Larchmond was confined. Without speaking to the prisoner, he opened the door and allowed the great detective to enter.

"I pity the poor lad," he whispered, "and if you can do anything for him I hope you will."

Once alone with the prisoner, Nick smiled cordially and held out his hand. At a glance he had "sized up" the young lawyer's clerk and made up his mind just how to handle him.

Larchmond had been sitting with his head between the palms of his hands. He sprang up with a puzzled look on his face.

"You—er—you have the best of me," he stammered, as he took the hand hesitatingly.

"So I have, Mr. Larchmond. Let me introduce myself. I am Nick Carter, the New York detective."

At once the young man's face became sober, and he set his teeth hard.

"He expects to have a struggle with me," thought Nick.

"I might have introduced myself as an old college acquaintance or something like that. But at the start of a case, sailing under false colors does not generally pay."

"May I ask what you wish of me, Mr. Carter?" asked Larchmond, after a brief pause.

"I have come to clear you, Larchmond."

"To clear me?"

"Yes."

"It is too late, sir. I have pleaded guilty."

Nick smiled broadly.

"So you have, my boy, but you couldn't fool an old hand like myself."

"I don't understand you."

"I knew you weren't guilty from the start."

Ralph Larchmond started back.

"You—you—what have you discovered?"

"Never mind that now. What I want to know is, what made you plead guilty?"

The young man drew a long breath. Several times he was about to speak, and each time closed his lips as tight as a trap.

"I see how it is," he said, finally. "You wish to get some sort of a confession from me, Mr. Carter. If that is so, it is useless. I have nothing to say."

"What! Will you stick to it that you murdered your uncle?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"For the simple reason that you did not."

"How do you know?"

"I am a detective of many years' standing. I know an innocent man when I see him."

"Thank you for the compliment, but—you are mistaken. I am guilty and have so confessed. You had better save your time and let the matter drop."

"You will not believe I can prove you innocent?"

"Exactly, and so I say you had better save your time for other cases."

Instead of bowing himself out at this, Nick dropped onto a bench in the cell.

"He is innocent, or else he is the most accomplished rogue and actor I ever ran across," he reasoned.

"He has some excellent reason for saying he is guilty, some reason that he is more afraid of than he is of being hung."

"He doesn't want me to probe into this matter. The bare idea of my taking up the case frightens him."

"He is a high-strung man, and I believe the letter was right in what was stated about preferring death to dishonor."

"The one question is, not being guilty himself, does he know who did commit the murder?"

"Mr. Larchmond," he began, abruptly, "where did you get the hypodermic syringe with which you introduced that poison into your uncle's system?"

Ralph Larchmond started back, and his face grew pale.

"I said I wouldn't answer any questions, and I won't!" he cried. "Let me add, I prefer to be left alone."

"Did your uncle give you the watch you pawned?"

"I won't answer you."

"You made away with a wad of money belonging to your uncle," went on Nick, with cutting coolness.

"I did not."

"You drank, drove fast horses, gambled——"

"Nothing of the kind! I was guilty of none of those vices!" cried the young man, excitedly.

"And you had a terrible row with your uncle in consequence."

"We had a quarrel, but about another matter."

"But it was your wild habits."

"No, it was not."

"What was it, then? Out with it."

Again Ralph Larchmond shut up like a clam. Nick had hoped to arouse him into speaking, and had almost done so. But the will power of the young man could not be broken.

"That was a private matter. Now, Mr. Carter, let me bid you good-day. I am guilty, and you may as well let this matter drop. There is neither glory nor reward in it for you. The credit all goes to Lannigan."

"Lannigan is an ass," thought Nick, but he said nothing, and a moment later left the cell.

"How did you make out?" asked the sheriff.

"Didn't make out. He is as stubborn as a mule."

"Do you believe he is guilty?"

"No."

"My own private opinion, Mr. Carter. But what does it all mean?"

"That remains to be found out. When is he to be sentenced?"

"A week from to-day."

"He shall never stand up for it—not if I can help it," muttered Nick to himself as he walked off.

"That man is as innocent as a babe unborn—to hang him would be to commit the blackest crime on the calendar.

"It's a wonder somebody doesn't come forward with an insanity plea in his behalf. That would be more sensible than taking his word for it that he is guilty."

CHAPTER III.

NICK MAKES A LITTLE DISCOVERY.

Jefferson Jans and Larry O'Toole, the butler, had been released from custody immediately after Larchmond's confession, and both were now back at the Brownlie mansion, where, with the other servants, they took it easy, pending a settlement of their wages and dismissal.

To the mansion Nick next made his way, intending to look over the ground, as he told Chick, and to interview all of those about the estate.

In the disguise of a piano tuner, hired by Oliver Brownlie some time before to look after the magnificent upright instrument in the music-room, he readily gained admittance to the mansion.

"What's this, Mr. Brownlie dead!" he exclaimed to O'Toole, who broke the news to him. "Dear me, is it possible?"

"Faith an' yez ought to know it," said O'Toole. "It happened the fore part of last week, so it did."

"I have been out in the country, and just got back to Baltimore to-day. And he

wished me to go over all of his instruments, not only the piano alone."

"Well, yez can do it, anyhow."

"And who will pay me, my dear man, will you?"

"Divil a bit will I! Yez will have to wait fer a settlement, the same as all of us."

"Ah!" Nick allowed his face to fall. "Perhaps I had better not go to work at all."

"Suit yerself," rejoined O'Toole.

Nick talked the matter over and finally concluded not to do any work. But he professed to be very much interested in poor Mr. Brownlie's death, and asked for all the particulars.

O'Toole had that day been imbibing quite freely of the wine under his care, and his tongue was in good condition to wag in consequence.

He took Nick outside into the garden and showed him exactly where he himself had picked up the lifeless body of the old man.

"Terrible! terrible!" murmured Nick. "Weren't you afraid?"

"Me? And why, sur? I never had a quarrel wid the ould man."

"I would be. A dead man, ugh!"

As he was speaking, Nick walked around the spot and examined it carefully.

A few faint footmarks did not escape him, and he walked carelessly over to a hedge to the left.

"Where are you going?" asked O'Toole, with sudden interest.

"Nowhere," and as he spoke Nick came back again.

After this the butler took Nick into the dining-room and pointed out the couch upon which the corpse had been deposited.

"What time was he found, did you say?"

"Tin, by the clock."

"You found him?"

"I picked him up. Jans found him."

"Dat's a fact," put in the colored coachman.

"Was it dark in the garden?"

"Putty dark. I didn't see de body till I most dun stumble ober it."

And then Jans went into all the details in the recital of which O'Toole joined.

Nick was greatly interested and spent over an hour in the house. He was told about Ralph and now the young man and his uncle had eaten dinner absolutely alone, even O'Toole being sent from the room.

Then, in a roundabout way, Nick asked about the young man and his habits. All of the servants took turns in speaking of their former young master, and the great detective soon had all the information he desired.

"Nothing was stolen from the house?" he asked.

"Nothing. The murderer and thief, whoever he was, didn't dare to come in," replied O'Toole.

Once out of the mansion again, Nick's brow wrinkled.

He had caught onto several clews, but they pointed in as many different directions.

"I'll go around and examine that trail from the garden first," he said to himself.

And making a few changes in his disguise, he walked to a back road, and came up in the rear, near the stable.

The garden was deserted, and, unobserved, the detective reached the hedge, which he had inspected while in the company of O'Toole.

He sprang over the brush, and picking up a few horsehairs here and there, continued down a little lane that ran to a country turnpike.

Here the horsehair trail came to an end.

"Got into a carriage here and drove away, that's certain," thought Nick.

"The horsehairs were on the murderer's clothing. He lost some of them in the gar-

den, and more getting over the hedge, and crawling along the lane.

"They are very common hairs—reddish brown, and to find the horse that shed them is totally out of the question, and it's equally useless to look for a man with such hairs on him."

Going back to the garden, Nick gained an entrance to the barn and looked at the horse-flesh there.

"Two bay mares and a black colt. Those hairs did not come from here.

"It was hardly worth coming back for. I'll stake my reputation on it that the murder was entirely the work of an outsider.

"Yet if the murderer came in a carriage, provided with a syringe full of poison, he was no ordinary tramp or cut-throat, nor did he do the deed just to rob Oscar Brownlie's pockets.

"I believe the robbery was an after-consideration, just to throw the police off the scent. Mr. Lannigan was right in this, anyhow.

"The murderer didn't expect Brownlie to die right away. He expected him to get sick and die in bed.

"Yet, under that circumstance, Brownlie would have recognized him—unless he was disguised.

"To my mind, this case is going to be something of a surprise party all the way through.

"First, a young man who is innocent declares himself guilty.

"Then somebody else who knows nothing of the murder writes to me to clear the self-accused man.

"Now it looks as if the murderer was disguised.

"And the self-accused man doesn't want any one to probe into the mystery. He would rather be hung.

"If any one started to hand over a more

complicated case I doubt if he could find a worse one."

In a thoughtful mood, Nick walked back to the center of the city.

From the sheriff he received a list of names of the people who had called on Ralph Larchmond while in prison.

On the list appeared Paul Becker, and Nick soon learned that Becker was Ralph's greatest friend.

"I'll call on Becker and see what he has to say," said Nick to himself. "It's an even chance he is the chap who got me to take hold of this job."

Dressed as a very old man, the detective hurried off to Becker's home.

He found that young man just preparing to go out. Becker's face looked thin and careworn.

"This is Mr. Becker?" asked Nick, in a feeble voice.

"Yes, I am Paul Becker."

"I come from the jail—I wish to see you in private."

"I do not know you."

"My name is Daniel Willowby."

"Come into the library, Mr. Willowby," and Becker ushered Nick in.

"Now, what can I do for you?" went on the young man, pushing forward a chair.

"I received your hundred dollars, Mr. Becker, and I am here for orders," was Nick's short reply.

Becker leaped back in amazement.

"What!"

"You did not expect to be traced up quite so soon, I presume," added Nick.

He saw that his bold stroke had fallen just in the proper spot.

"You are Nick Carter?"

"Yes."

Paul Becker gave a groan.

"I might have known it! They told me that you always found out everything, when once you started."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"I don't want to be known in this matter, Mr. Carter. I would rather——"

He broke off short.

"I have broken my oath to Ralph Larchmond."

"What was the oath?"

"To say nothing—do nothing."

"Then you know all about the murder?"

"As I wrote, I know nothing about the murder."

"But why this secrecy? What do you know? You might as well tell everything. It must come out sooner or later."

"My lips are sealed! Gladly would I speak were that not so!"

"As much of a mystery as is Larchmond himself," thought Nick.

"Sealed to reveal nothing?"

"To reveal nothing concerning a certain subject."

Nick surveyed Paul Becker in silence for a moment.

"I believe I understand you at last. You say Larchmond is innocent and that you know he did not commit the murder."

"Ye-es," returned Becker, hesitatingly.

"Then, were your lips not sealed, you could help him prove an alibi. Am I not right?"

"You are, Mr. Carter."

"Where was Ralph Larchmond on the evening of the murder?"

"I have sworn not to tell."

"He was out of the city?"

"I have sworn not to tell."

"You are stubborn—even where a human life is concerned."

Paul Becker's face flushed and he bit his lips.

"Mr. Carter, look at me. Do I look like a man who is willfully stubborn? Ralph Larchmond and I were old college chums, we belonged to the same secret societies, we

were closer than brothers. His secrets are mine, so far as keeping them are concerned, especially in this particular, where I have given him my sacred word not to reveal them. Now do you see how I am situated? I would do more than you can imagine to save his life, excepting to break my word."

"Suppose he goes to the scaffold to hang?" asked Nick, dryly.

A shiver swept over Paul Becker's body.

"Don't speak of that, don't!"

"Mr. Becker, look it squarely in the face. Will you let him hang?"

"That will depend upon himself. He can speak as well as I."

"Suppose I arrest you?"

Paul Becker drew himself up, and his eyes flashed fire.

"If you would be so unfair as to do that, let me say beforehand, it would do you no good."

"A thoroughbred," thought Nick. "To drive him is out of the question, and I fancy trying to lead him will be equally fruitless."

"Well, I do not intend to arrest you, Becker. But if you want me to help you, you must help me."

"How can I do that? I know absolutely nothing about the murder. All I can say is that Ralph Larchmond was not there. If you can find the murderer you can clear him without prying into private affairs which have nothing to do with the case."

"Are you sure they have nothing to do with the murder?"

Paul Becker paused for a moment before replying.

"I cannot see how the two could possibly be connected."

By his manner, Nick felt that the young man was speaking the truth.

The plain fact was then that Larchmond had been to some place in secret on the evening of the murder.

What he had done or upon whom he had called was not to be made known, even at the cost of being able to prove an alibi.

Suddenly Nick arose.

"Here is your hundred dollars, Mr. Becker," he said, and brought forth the bill.

"Why—er—you——"

"I decline to have anything more to do with the case." Nick placed the bill on the table. "Good-day."

"Hold on!" Becker caught him by the arm. "Please don't give it up, Mr. Carter. I said I would pay the bill later on—when I get my money—and I will, no matter what it is."

"It is not a question of money, Becker," said Nick, and despite the young man's entreaties, he moved toward the door.

"Won't you wait—I'll—I'll——"

"Tell me what I want to know?"

"I can't do that, but I'll see Larchmond and reason with him, and failing there, perhaps I can make another arrangement—elsewhere."

The last word came in a low tone. It was just what Nick was working for. He halted at once.

"Then I will wait and call on you to-morrow at this hour."

"You won't go ahead otherwise?"

"No," said Nick, feeling sure now of his man.

"Then let it be so, to-morrow at this hour."

CHAPTER IV.

A YOUNG MAN'S ROMANCE.

"Now he'll go and see Larchmond and then—it will pay to follow him."

Thus Nick Carter reasoned to himself after leaving Paul Becker's house.

"There is a third party in this deal, and before trying to clear Ralph Larchmond, I must find out something about the unknown."

Nick had not long to wait for Becker to come forth.

From behind a tree, he saw the young man leave his residence and walk off rapidly in the direction of the jail.

He was admitted and spent nearly half an hour with the prisoner.

The two spoke in whispers, and it was absolutely impossible for Nick or any one else to get onto what was said.

The interview over, Paul Becker came forth and sprang on a street car.

He alighted at the depot, and hurrying to the ticket office, purchased a ticket for Washington and went out on the station platform.

Nick followed suit.

The special was due, so there was no time to waste.

When the train came along, he saw Paul Becker get in one car and then he entered another.

It was evening by the time the capital was reached.

Without losing a moment's time, Paul Becker left the station and called a cab.

Entering this, he gave the driver a few hurried directions and off went the turnout at a good rate of speed.

Nick was not slow in hiring a second cab, which was soon bowling along behind the other.

The heart of the great capital was passed, and the two cabs came out on the road to Mt. Pleasant.

The first cab did not go far, however, in this direction. It soon turned into a side road, and at length came to a halt in front of an old house built of stone and marble.

Nick dismissed his cabman and took to a number of bushes which were handy. He saw Paul Becker alight and walk up to the door of the house. A loud use of the ancient brass knocker brought a quick response, and the young man was admitted.

Taking advantage of the gathering darkness, Nick lost no time in gaining a side porch, partly covered with withered vines.

The window of the porch was tightly closed, but, after ascertaining that the room beyond was empty, Nick opened the catch and noiselessly entered the house.

The room had once been a library, but now it contained nothing more than a table and half a dozen chairs. On the table stood some wineglasses, and several packs of cards were scattered about.

"Hullo! here's a little discovery!" said Nick to himself. "A gambling den in a country house. This is better than risking a raid right in the heart of Washington."

A number of footsteps were heard in the hall beyond, and then came voices. Nick had just time enough to secrete himself behind an empty bookstand in one corner when the door opened and Paul Becker and a woman entered.

The woman was not more than thirty-five years of age. Her face was highly powdered, and she wore a loose gown above a shabby pair of shoes, which were unbuttoned.

"I was hardly ready for visitors yet," she said to Becker, in a soft, but not altogether pleasing tone. "No one is expected until nine or ten."

"That is why I came early, Madame Le Rue," replied Becker.

"I want to talk to you alone."

"Of course," and the French woman shrugged her shoulders.

"You know why I have come."

"I can guess it—as you Yankees say."

"I have just come from the prison."

"Well?"

"Don't stand there and smile at me in that way," burst out Becker.

"You know well enough what I want."

"So I do, and you know very well my answer, Mr. Becker," retorted the French woman.

"You will not save him?"

"Oh, yes, if——"

"If he will come to your terms?"

"That is it."

"You are very unreasonable."

"So you told me before."

"You would let poor Ralph Larchmond hang rather than do the first thing to save him!"

"You are mistaken. I would do very much to save him—were it in my power."

"He says he will do anything on earth for you excepting what you ask."

"Nothing else will do, Monsieur Becker—nothing."

"Suppose he dies—what good will that do?"

"If he chooses to refuse me, let him die!"

As the French woman spoke she tossed her head and her eyes flashed fire.

"What if I break my word?" questioned Paul Becker, eying her closely.

The woman laughed boldly.

"Your word to him? That will do no good."

"Why not?"

"It will not force me to speak."

"Under arrest you may be forced to speak."

"Never. I would say it is a plot between you and your friend. You can force me to do nothing, Monsieur Becker."

The young man's face grew white, and he walked up and down the apartment nervously. Suddenly he stepped up to the woman and caught her by the arm.

"Were I Ralph Larchmond, I would strangle you to death, you viper!" he cried, hotly. "You very nearly ruined his life, and now you will stand by and see him hung for a crime he did not commit! It would be more proper were you to occupy the position in which he is placed."

"Me!" The woman started back and

turned pale. "I had nothing to do with Oscar Brownlie's murder—I hardly knew the man."

"You did know him—made yourself friendly with him so as to find out if Ralph was really to be his heir. Ralph told me so himself. He found it out by accident."

"I never went near Oscar Brownlie. He sought me, just as Ralph Larchmond did. They both visited this very house."

"Was Mr. Brownlie here recently?" asked Becker, curiously.

"Oh, no, he dropped off when Ralph began to come, four months ago."

"I presume you got some money out of him?" sneered the young man.

"He paid for his wine and the right to play cards with the others, that is all," was the sharp reply.

"Did he lose much money here?"

"I believe not. He never played high."

"With whom did he play?"

"That is a private matter, Monsieur Becker."

"Oh, of course. You are not going to hurt your little gambling trade. His friends did not know he came here."

"Were it not for such places as this, young gentlemen like you would say there was no place where you might enjoy yourself," retorted the woman.

"You refuse utterly to help my friend?"

"I will do as I said I would. He knows what that is—even if you do not."

At that moment a loud knock was heard on the front door of the old mansion.

"Some of the gentlemen, do doubt," said Madame Le Rue. "I must hurry and dress. What more have you to say?"

Paul Becker was silent for a moment.

"Nothing," he answered, abruptly.

"Nothing excepting that you are the most cruel woman I ever met in my life!"

"Pray, no compliments, Monsieur Becker."

"You profess to think so much of my chum and yet you are willing to let him hang when you can easily help him prove an alibi."

To this the French woman did not reply, and a moment later both left the apartment.

Of course, Nick had heard every word.

He smiled softly to himself when left alone.

"She is a tartar," he thought. "She holds a strong hand, and she intends to hold it to the end.

"She wants to force Larchmond either into paying her some large sum of money or into marrying her, or something equally bad, and if he won't do it, she is willing to let him hang.

"She has an iron nerve, and to arrest her and try to make her talk will result in absolute failure.

"As it is, if cornered, she may be able to tell many things real or fictitious, which will only make things look blacker for Larchmond.

"Paul Becker is a true friend, but he is trying a hopeless scheme, and he knows it.

"I would know now that Larchmond was innocent, even if I had not felt certain of it before.

"But there is one thing in this case that is new to me. That is that Oscar Brownlie used to come here to see this woman and to gamble.

"In Baltimore they pretended that he was only a rich musical crank. Perhaps his private life had two sides to it, as has the life of many another man."

Nick moved cautiously toward the hall door, and seeing a good chance, slipped outside.

In the front end of the hall there were several men, talking to an elderly female, evidently a trusted servant. Paul Becker had disappeared.

"Madame will be down in a few minutes, gentlemen," the servant was saying.

"Please make yourselves at home."

"We will, Mary," returned a tall fellow. "Come on, Senator," he added to his companion.

And two of the men walked into a side room, followed by the third.

"Regular gamblers," was Nick's mental comment. "And one of them a United States Senator.

"Evidently the house is well-known, and is not such a second-rate place as I at first supposed."

The men gone, the servant hurried again to the rear out of sight, leaving the detective in sole possession of the hall, which was but dimly lit.

Waiting to make sure that he had not been seen, the detective glided up the carpeted stairs to the floor above.

From under the door of a side room streamed a bright light, and Nick rightly guessed that this room was the one in which Madame Le Rue was making her toilet.

He heard the closing of a bureau drawer and the moving of a chair.

"There, now, I am ready to go below, Pierre," Nick heard the madame say.

"Wait a moment, Babette," came the reply in the heavy voice of a man. "Tell me about that young fool who just called upon you."

CHAPTER V.

A SLICK DISAPPEARANCE.

Nick became all attention.

To him it was plain that the man and the woman in the room were something more than interested in each other.

"The gentlemen below are waiting, Pierre."

"Let them wait. What did the young fool want?"

"He came to see me on a private matter."
"About what?"
"Helping Ralph Larchmond."
"The devil! And what did you tell him?"
"Don't get alarmed, Pierre."
"I say, what did you tell him?" demanded the man.
"I—I said I would do nothing."
"Ah!" The man drew a long breath.
"How did he want you to help him—prove an alibi?"
"Yes."
"You can't do that, can you?"
"No."
"He was not here at all that night, was he?"
"No, I did not see him."
"Then what made him come to you? Does he imagine you think so much of him?"
"I don't know. Pierre, you are exceedingly jealous."
"I will not have him nor any one else stand in my way, Babette."
"You have been drinking or you would not talk so loud. Do you want to give the house a bad name?"
"No."
"Then talk more softly."
The man lowered his voice, and several sentences were spoken which Nick did not catch.
"I will find out," suddenly exclaimed the man.
"You will only get into trouble, Pierre."
"Perhaps not."
"The authorities are on guard. They may suspect you of being the murderer," went on the woman.
The man muttered something under his breath.
"I don't understand your doings, Babette."
"Nor I yours, Pierre."
"You never told me that Oscar Brownlie used to come here."

"What was the use? He was only one customer out of a score."
"And when he stopped coming, Ralph Larchmond came."
"Yes, he gambled in place of his uncle."
"Did you get much out of him?"
Madame Le Rue smiled grimly.
"I won a thousand dollars from him one night."
"Did he have so much with him?"
"No, but he promised to pay in one week and put down a memorandum of it."
"And he paid?"
"To be sure. If he had not, I would have——"
"What?"
"Never mind. I have his letters, you know."
"I don't know," growled the Frenchman.
"No? I thought you did," returned the madame.
"The letters mentioned in that other memorandum," said Nick Carter to himself.
"That is important."
"I would like to see his letters," went on the Frenchman, suspiciously.
"Oh, I haven't time now," was the hasty reply.
"It won't take me long to look them over."
"Pierre, you are altogether too suspicious."
"Maybe I ought to be."
"You silly boy! Now let me go below; the gentlemen are waiting."
"But, Babette——"
"Not another word. There is a kiss for you that you don't deserve."
As the madame spoke, she bent down and kissed the Frenchman's cheek. Then she swept from the room just as Nick sprang around a corner of the hallway, out of sight.
The detective heard a door below open and close, and then made his way silently back to the entrance of the room.

Through the back crack of the doorway, he saw a tall man sitting in a rocking-chair smoking vigorously.

His face was full of mingled stupidity and cunning.

Left to himself, he smoked on in silence for several minutes.

Then he got up and listened attentively.

From below came the murmur of voices and the occasional clink of a glass.

Apparently satisfied, the man moved across the madame's room to the bureau.

The drawers were locked, but the keys were in a work-basket near by, and soon the Frenchman had all of them open.

He began a rapid search of the contents, tumbling the clothing and other articles roughly aside.

Evidently he could not find that for which he was searching.

Locking up the bureau again, he next tried a trunk in one corner.

His success here was no greater than before.

Then he went through the closet. Nick could not now see him so well, but presently he heard the man utter a low exclamation of satisfaction.

From behind a hat-box he had pulled out a round leather bag.

This he opened and drew forth a handful of gold, in five and ten-dollar pieces.

He counted out fifty dollars, which he placed in his pocket.

The remainder of the money was restored to the leather bag, which was then replaced to its original position.

The money secured, the Frenchman sat down again to smoke.

"If I had those letters," he murmured to himself, in French.

He sat still so long that Nick began to grow tired and was just on the point of going below, when the man arose and came out.

He turned to the rear of the hallway, and Nick had a lively time to get out of his sight.

The man descended a back stairs which led to a small entry way opening upon a porch.

It was blowing quite strongly outside, and the indications were that it would soon rain.

Down into the garden went the Frenchman, with Nick but a few yards behind him.

Once the man looked back, as if afraid some one from the house was following him, but Nick had been prepared for this and was out of sight behind a box hedge.

"That fellow has a guilty conscience," said Nick to himself, "and it's not altogether on account of the money he has taken."

At the end of the garden stood a small shed where horses could be tied up.

Entering this, the Frenchman looked around.

"Hullo, gone!" he cried to himself.

Then he came out and paused as if undecided whether or not to go back to the house.

At that instant it began to rain. At first the drops came scatteringly, but soon there fell a perfect torrent.

Not caring to get soaked, Nick sought a tree for protection.

The Frenchman went back to the shed.

In a little while Nick followed to the shed. The man was gone.

In vain the detective made search for him.

Pierre had taken himself off in spite of the blackness of the night and the howling storm.

"Humph, he must love to be drowned more than I do," and after waiting for a second shower to let up a bit, Nick returned to the old mansion, fully convinced that he was not yet through with this man.

Several more sports arrived, and there were sounds that indicated some lively games were in progress.

Looking into one of the rooms, Nick made a discovery that interested him not a little.

Seated at one of the tables was a well-known United States Senator, reported to be very wealthy, whom Nick had met before in more reputable places.

The Senator's face was flushed, and his whole manner betokened that he had been drinking a trifle more than usual.

At the head of the table sat Madame Le Rue, watching her noted visitor sharply.

At certain times she would make a sign to one of the men nearest to her, who would thereupon make a bet of a hundred dollars.

"Go you a hundred an' fifty," mumbled the Senator.

"Two hundred."

"Three hundred."

"Four hundred," was the gambler's cool reply.

"You think you can bluff me, don't you?" muttered the Senator. "Well, you just can't. Five hundred."

And thus the betting went on, until the amount reached an even thousand.

Nick saw without speculating very deeply how matters were running.

The gambler, urged by Madame Le Rue, intended to fleece their victim when he was in no condition to take care of himself.

Ordinarily the man was a good player, but in his present condition he was in no shape at all to handle the pasteboards.

Nick hated to see his friend robbed before his eyes and resolved to do what he could for his protection.

Retreating to the front door, he let himself out.

In the darkness he made a lightning change in his disguise.

When he had finished, he was the personification of another Senator.

Nick's next move was to hammer vigorously and long upon the door before him.

The establishment was aroused, and in some fear the servant answered the summons.

"I want the Senator!" cried Nick, rushing inside the house and up to the room.

"Want me? Hullo, old man, what's the row?"

"Come with me; you are wanted at a special caucus," cried Nick.

"But I'm playing ——"

"Bother the game! Come on!"

And in spite of the Senator's protestations, Nick made the man take up his money and leave the place. Nor would he listen to the gambler's rather mild threats for so doing.

But once away from the house, the Senator demanded an explanation—and he got it—in a way that astonished him beyond measure.

He became sober enough to see the force of all Nick told him, and did not need much urging to leave for his home.

Ten minutes later, through the rain and darkness, Nick made his way to Washington and to the railroad depot.

One train for Baltimore had left half an hour before. Another would start in twenty minutes.

As Nick stood in the waiting-room, drying himself by the steam radiator, a man entered.

It was Pierre, the Frenchman.

CHAPTER VI.

NICK STRIKES A CLEW.

The moment that Nick saw the man he moved out of sight behind several persons standing near.

He saw Pierre gaze about anxiously, and then retire to a corner, where he screened himself from observation behind a newspaper.

"He is afraid of being seen, that's certain," thought Nick.

"If it wasn't for the weather, he would have remained outside.

"The chances are that he is going to take a train somewhere. I think it will pay to keep him in sight."

It was not long before the train for Baltimore and Philadelphia came along, and Pierre at once got aboard.

Nick followed behind a fat woman and her baby and took one of the rear seats, where, leaning against the window blind, he pretended to go to sleep.

For fully ten minutes Pierre kept his eyes open watching those coming in and going out of the car. Then, apparently satisfied that he had escaped from Washington unobserved, he heaved a deep sigh of relief and settled himself back in the car seat.

He was fully as wet as was Nick, and on his clothing could still be seen some of the dirt from the ditch through which he had crawled.

The train rolled on, and just before midnight Baltimore was reached, and more than half of the passengers alighted.

The Frenchman got off with the others, with Nick close behind him. The rain had ceased, and Pierre quickly stepped out upon the street, heading in the direction of Chesapeake Heights.

"I suppose I'll have to make a night of it," thought Nick. "He has come to this place for no good purpose."

Block after block was passed, and still Pierre kept on with Nick not far behind.

At length a road-house was reached. It is a well-known resort, and has stood in that spot for over a third of a century.

The road-house was kept by a man named Tooker and was known as Tooker's Rest. Nick had been to this place on a previous visit to Baltimore, and he knew that Tooker had a reputation that was far from good.

Although on a road that was lined with

dwelling, the house stood in the center of a large plot of ground. On either side of it was a long and high board fence, and behind these fences were situated the stables and sheds.

Pierre passed up the porch of the resort and tried the bar-room door. It was open, and he disappeared within.

A burst of wild laughter told Nick that a merry crowd was present, and buttoning up his coat, he followed Pierre inside.

Half a dozen men were at a table drinking and two others were at the bar, talking to Tooker and an assistant.

"Hullo!" Nick heard Tooker say to the Frenchman, and then the two at once walked to some room in the rear.

The assistant came forward to attend to the newcomer, and the great detective was not backward in giving an order for a hot drink.

From the seat he had taken, he heard the Frenchman and Tooker having a lively discussion beyond, and watching his chance, he slipped through the back door into a store-room.

From this place he saw that the two men were seated in a kitchen before a blazing wood fire in a cook stove.

"It feels good after being out in the rain," Pierre was saying. "I am soaked to the skin."

"Why didn't you bring an umbrella?" asked Tooker.

"I hadn't time. I had to run to catch the train."

"Well, are you ready to fix me up?"

"I'll let you have a hundred."

The road-house keeper let out an oath at this.

"It was to be a spot-cash transaction, Garot," he cried.

"True. But when the money is not forthcoming——"

"Couldn't you get anything from her?"

"Not a cent."

"She is then more miserly than ever."

"She is." The Frenchman sprang to his feet. "Curse her! I sometimes think I am a big fool to run after her."

"Don't you make any headway with her?"

"Sometimes I think I do, and then she throws me off like one would an old glove."

"Why don't you force her?"

"How can I?"

"You might threaten her with exposure."

"Bah! It would do no good. I know her better than you do, Tooker."

"Well, suit yourself. But I must have my money. Or else——"

"What?"

"I will give you away."

"You dare not, Tooker!"

"You'll see."

The Frenchman grew nervous. He walked up and down the kitchen.

"What good will it do you to give me away, as you call it? You will not get a cent."

"I don't know about that. Sometimes there is money in such a proceeding."

"Better wait. I may yet get more money from Madame Le Rue. She was out of sorts to-night, because some young fool was there to bother her."

"Who?"

"Oh, some fool after his money, I suppose."

"Humph! She fleeces a good many, doesn't she?"

"No, she is not sharp enough for that. But the establishment pays very well, and she is very close," and Garot ground his teeth in anger.

A moment of silence followed.

"Do you know you lamed my horse that night," went on the road-house keeper.

"No! How should I?"

"Come off. You must have driven him like the very devil."

"I did not. Most likely he has gone lame since."

"I know better. I only have two nags, and I know all about both of them."

"Is he bad?"

"Oh, no, he'll get over it."

After this, Pierre said he was dry, and the two men returned to the bar-room.

Nick had listened to the talk with deep interest.

From the store-room the detective slipped out into the yard and hurried around to Tooker's private stable.

The door was fastened with a common padlock, and this was quickly picked.

Nick lit his lantern and inspected the road-house keeper's two horses.

One was black and the other reddish-brown.

The latter shade matched the hairs Nick had found in the Brownlie garden and on the hedge.

Nick had struck a positive clew this time.

"Pierre Garot is my man."

"He murdered Oscar Brownlie beyond a doubt."

"But how did he do the deed, and for what purpose?"

"It is possible that Madame Le Rue induced him to commit the deed."

"But why was he killed in such a peculiar manner?"

A moment later Nick was on his way back to the house.

He had found the murderer, but it was still necessary to fasten the crime on him.

Re-entering the store-room, he again slipped to the front.

The gang of men were preparing to leave the place. Garot was not in sight, but Tooker was behind the bar with his assistant.

Nothing had been thought of Nick's disappearance by the assistant, and nothing was said when the detective stepped up to pay his bill.

Once outside, Nick looked up and down the road eagerly for some sign of the Frenchman.

Garot was not to be seen.

Talking loudly to themselves, the gang from the road-house came out.

Four of the men immediately sprang into a carriage brought from the sheds.

The other two men started off on foot.

Of the latter the younger was very white, and he staggered in a way that showed he was not merely drunk but sick.

"Look here, I want to go home alone," he hiccupped to his companion.

"That's all right, Mr. Aspen, I'll take you home and see you safe," replied his companion, in a soothing tone.

"I want to go alone."

"But you can't get home alone. Here, give me your arm."

"I have got plenty o' money to hire a rig."

"Oh, never mind a rig, let us walk. Come, let me take your arm."

As the older man spoke he led the other fellow away as far as possible from the road-house.

He was a doubtful-looking individual, and Nick at once sized him up as a sport of bad character.

The pair had gone but a hundred feet when Tooker came running after them.

"Here's your package, Meggs," he said to the older man, and as he handed over something that looked to be of no consequence, he added, in a lower tone: "A square half, remember."

"All right, Tooker, if I can make it," was the equally low reply, and then Tooker went back to his resort.

It was apparent that the man was drugged.

He did not belong to the crowd, and now this other fellow was about to clean him out, with half of the booty to go to Tooker.

"Look here, my friend, I'm mighty funny in my head," hiccupped Aspen, presently.

"Oh, that's a bit of booze, that's all. You'll sleep it off by morning."

"I never felt so before. I believe that darn beer made me sick."

"You'll soon be home."

"I can't see nothin'."

"Suppose we sit down," suggested Meggs, as he led the way to the steps of an empty house.

"Yes, give me a chance—I'm sick all over—dark—the luck—that beer——"

Aspen said no more.

He fell up against Meggs and his eyes closed.

The drug or "knock-out drops," as it is called, had done its work, for he was unconscious and would be for several hours. When he came to it would be next to impossible for him to remember where he had been or what had happened.

Supporting the unconscious man, Meggs dragged him to the steps and laid him down.

Then, with a swiftness that betokened much practice, the rascal proceeded to go through Aspen's pockets.

The job was soon finished, and with his booty stowed away on his own person, Meggs prepared to leave Aspen to his fate.

But as he turned away, Nick's hand came down heavily upon his shoulder.

"Arrested in the act, my man," said the great detective, sternly.

CHAPTER VII.

NICK BECOMES A KNOCKER-OUT.

Meggs was taken completely by surprise.

"What—what's that?" he stammered.

"You heard what I said, Meggs."

"Who are you?"

"An officer."

"What are you going to arrest me for?"

"Robbery at present. I may have a more serious charge against you if Aspen doesn't get over this all right."

"I haven't done anything to him," muttered the prisoner, sullenly.

"No? What are you doing with his watch and money and diamond pin in your pockets?"

"I was going to keep them for him," was the glib reply. "He is simply drunk, and I can't carry him home alone. If I left all his things on him somebody might come along and rob him. I was going to give his stuff back when he sobered up."

Nick could not help but smile.

"Pretty well put, Meggs, but it don't go with me. I have seen too many of your kind before. Your game is an old one."

"Who the devil are you?"

"I have no objection to telling you, Meggs. I am Nick Carter."

"Gee!" Meggs was silent for a moment. "Say, I ain't done nothing fer you to get after me."

"Thanks, Meggs, for thinking me above such petty work. I'll admit this came in my way by accident."

"Then wot's the matter with letting me go by accident, Mr. Carter? It's my first offense."

"Your style doesn't prove that, Meggs. Besides, to let you go would spoil a little plan I have in mind."

Meggs begged and argued, but all to no purpose.

Nick marched him to a near-by residence.

Here the owner was aroused and asked to look after Aspen until his folks could be notified. It afterward transpired that Aspen came from Glyndon and was in Baltimore merely to see the city.

He had fallen in with Meggs down near the river, and Meggs had immediately taken him in tow.

Nick lost no time in marching Meggs to police headquarters, where the case was explained to the officer in charge, and then the great detective began a private examination of his man.

"Now, Meggs, out with the truth," said Nick. "How long have you known Tooker?"

"About a year."

"How many men have you taken there to be knocked out?"

"Never took any one there before."

"Did you drug Aspen, or did Tooker give him the dose?"

"Tooker."

"After you had tipped him the wink?"

"Yes."

"And Tooker to get half?"

"Yes!"

"Is this his regular business?"

"I reckon it is. I don't know."

"Were you going back to Tooker's to-night?"

"Yes, I have a room there."

"Where is your room?"

"What do you want to know that for?"

"Never mind."

"I haven't any stuff hidden there."

"Answer my question."

"My room is in the wing on the left over the dining-room."

"Was Tooker going to wait for you to come back?"

"I don't know. If I didn't see him to-night I would in the morning."

"Who else is stopping at the house?"

"One or two sports. I don't know them very well, because I ain't at the road-house more than a quarter of the time."

"How did you expect to evade Aspen when he came around?"

"Oh, I would keep out of sight, and

Tooker would swear Aspen had merely called at his resort for a drink," replied Meggs.

Nick asked the rascal no more questions.

He knew that Pierre Garot was now on guard, and the Frenchman might become so frightened as to leave Baltimore and the country at any moment despite the attachment between himself and Madame Le Rue.

Going outside, Nick asked that Meggs be stripped of his present suit of clothing.

"He can have my suit," said Nick. "It is better than his own and will fit him just as well."

Meggs protested roundly to making the change, but this availed him nothing.

The detective soon had himself toggled out as the tricky sport.

Then Nick made up his face to match. The police officer in charge gazed at him in wonder.

"You are a marvel, Mr. Carter," said one. "No wonder you always come out on top. But what is it all for?"

"Wait and see," replied Nick, and with a smile, he quitted the headquarters.

Springing into a night cab, he was soon on his way back to Tooker's resort. He left the cab when in sight of the road-house.

"Want me to wait, boss?"

"No."

The cab drove off and Nick walked to the resort, to find it tightly closed.

But hardly had he stepped on the porch when the bar-room door was opened by Tooker.

"Well, how did you make out?" asked the man, eagerly.

"All right," returned Nick, as he walked in.

"No trouble at all?"

"Oh, a little."

"Where did you leave him?"

"Down on a side street in town. When

he comes around he won't know where he has been."

"What kind of a haul was it?"

"Only fair," growled Nick. "The watch is no good, and the diamond looks like paste."

"And the cash?"

"Forty-eight dollars."

"Let me see the watch."

Nick brought out the things taken from Aspen and handed the watch and pin over for inspection.

"By the way," he went on, "who was that Frenchy-looking chap who came in here while we were drinking?"

"Oh, he's a fellow I know from Washington."

"Is he staying here?"

"Only for to-night."

"He seemed to be clear. Is he one of the gang?"

"No."

"Got a lay of his own, eh?"

"How do I know?" growled Tooker. "Say," he went on, "let me keep this pin and you can have the watch and the cash."

"Come off!"

"That's an even divide."

"It is when you give me a twenty to boot."

Tooker grumbled at this, but finally agreed to give Nick two weeks' board free.

"Now we'll go to bed," said the road-house keeper. "That Frenchman is in the next room to you, and I advise you to make as little noise as possible, if you don't want trouble."

Nick said no more, but followed Tooker out of the bar-room into the side hall.

They ascended the stairs, and Nick entered the chamber Meggs had stated was his.

He heard Tooker move to the front of the house, and then all became quiet.

As soon as he was assured of this, Nick

came out and listened at the door of the room, which the road-house keeper had said was occupied by Pierre Garot.

He had hardly taken up his position when he heard the man get up from the bed.

By the way he stepped on the floor Nick knew the Frenchman had his boots on.

"Hullo, what does this mean?" thought Nick. "He hasn't retired for the night, then."

He heard Garot move toward the door. He had hardly time to back away into a dark corner when Garot came out.

Very carefully the Frenchman felt his way down the carpeted stairs and into the rear hall.

Nick followed him as silently as a shadow. Garot left the road-house by way of the kitchen. He took the key with him and locked the door from the outside.

Once in the yard, he hurried for the stable. It took Nick but a minute to pass through a window and go after his man.

His curiosity was now aroused. On what sort of a secret mission was Garot going?

"He is not running away, that's certain," thought Nick.

Going to the barn, Garot got out the reddish-brown horse and led him around to the road.

Then leaping on the animal's back, he started off at a brisk pace.

It did not take Nick long to make up his mind, and, luckily, as before stated, Tooker owned two horses, and they were not very far apart as the Frenchman moved along at a lively gait.

Nick knew he ran a good chance of discovery, but this could not be avoided.

Nearly a mile and a half were covered, and then they turned into the road leading to the rear of the Brownlie estate.

"Hullo, what does this mean? That man is making a foolish move to come here."

The question was quickly settled.

Garot turned into the lane and tied his horse behind a clump of trees.

Then he leaped over the hedge and sneaked across the garden to the mansion.

He walked all around the place, to satisfy himself that all of the inmates had retired.

Then mounting a side piazza, he began work on a window.

He was evidently an expert, for soon the catch was forced back and the window raised.

The next moment Pierre Garot had disappeared inside of the house of the very man he had murdered less than two weeks before.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROBBING THE DEAD.

Nick felt that the end of this mysterious case was not far off.

Garot had visited the house for a purpose, and that revealed, the rest would no doubt speedily follow. It looked as if Nick was to be saved a great deal of work by the man he was after.

With greater caution than ever, he also entered the garden.

But instead of attempting to gain entrance to the house by the piazza window, he rapidly climbed another piazza to the second story, where he found a window partly raised to admit some fresh air.

Through this he stepped into a sleeping apartment.

As it happened, the apartment was being occupied by O'Toole, the butler. It was a much better place than the man had up under the roof, and O'Toole was making the most of it, previous to his leaving when a settlement of wages was reached.

Nick would have passed through the apartment all right had not an unusual circumstance been against him.

This circumstance was nothing more than

a toothache which O'Toole possessed. The pain of it was so great that it had kept the butler half awake ever since he had lain down.

He roused up with an extra twitch as Nick moved across the floor, and opening his eyes, was frightened half to death at the sight.

"Hullo! Who the divil——" he began.

"Hush!" whispered Nick, and rushing forward, he put his hand over the butler's mouth. "Don't make a sound."

"Spare me! Don't take me life!" gasped the butler.

"Keep quiet, I tell you."

"Is it a burglar you are?" chattered O'Toole.

"No, I am not a burglar. I am a detective, and I am after a burglar who is down-stairs now."

"A detective?"

"Yes. Now be quiet, unless you want the burglar to get away."

"Bad cess to him. But how do I know you are an officer?"

"You'll take my word for that, O'Toole."

"You know me?"

"Yes; now be quiet, or I'll arrest you for being in with that rascal down-stairs."

This frightened the butler more than ever. But he remained quiet, holding his cheek which contained the jumping tooth.

"Are any of the servants below?" went on Nick.

"No, sur."

"All right. Now, stay here and don't come down unless I call you."

With these instructions, Nick glided out of the room and down the long, winding stairs.

A dim light pervaded the lower hall. On either side the doors were closed.

Nick listened at the door of the apartment Garot had entered. He heard the man

moving around. He had lit a dark lantern, and occasionally the light would flash under the crack of the door.

Presently the Frenchman walked into the music-room. Then Nick entered the apartment he had left and kept him in plain sight.

As has been said, the music-room was well stocked with rare violins and other musical instruments, which hung in glass cabinets on the walls.

At one end of the rather bare room stood a magnificent upright piano, and at the other a large house organ.

Garot paused to listen, and then apparently satisfied that he was unobserved, approached the organ.

He set down his lantern and began to examine the woodwork which enclosed the bellows of the instrument.

It was not long before he shoved in a small panel which moved on a pair of concealed hinges.

He flashed the lantern light into the opening beyond and brought forth a small flat box of a handsome, inlaid pattern.

Placing the box in his pocket, he closed the panel of the organ and then arose once more to his feet.

"Now I will see who holds the winning hand," he muttered to himself.

Again he listened. Nick, behind a large music rack, made not the faintest sound.

Evidently Garot had now accomplished the purpose which had brought him to the mansion, but he was not satisfied.

He looked around at the costly instruments, and he paused in front of a beautiful Cremona violin which had cost Oscar Brownlie an even twelve hundred dollars.

The instrument was worth the money, and Garot knew he could get a good price for it from a pawnbroker in Philadelphia or New York.

He took it down, hunted up a leather case to fit it, and placed the Cremona inside.

Again he paused, then moved into the library beyond.

Here a small safe was built in the wall.

But the door was closed, and after trying in vain to work the combination, Garot gave it up with a shake of his head.

Leaving the safe, the Frenchman passed into the hallway.

Suddenly a curse was heard, then the light went out and all became dark.

Nick knew that Garot had become alarmed, and would now try his best to get outside at once, so he was after him in a hurry. When in the hallway he stumbled over O'Toole.

The butler had crept down-stairs, curious to see what was taking place.

"I have ye! bad cess to ye!" howled the Irishman, and caught Nick by the waist.

"Blockhead, let go of me!" returned Nick, sharply. "You have made a mess of it, as it is."

"I have ye!" repeated O'Toole, and then he found himself hurled half the length of the hall in a manner calculated to shake him up, even if it did not drive any common sense into him.

Then Nick made after Garot, who by this time had gained a rear door. The detective heard a loud slam, and he knew that the Frenchman was once more out of the mansion. He had left the Cremona violin behind, but had the inlaid box.

"I ought to have tied that chump fast to his bed," muttered Nick, and skipped out after Garot.

A rush through the dark lane told him that the man he was after was once more on horseback.

At first Nick thought to ride him down on the second horse, but immediately almost he changed his mind.

He felt that Garot, if he found he was not pursued, would go straight back to Tooker's road-house.

Leaving O'Toole to do as he pleased, Nick made his way to the second horse and started for the road-house by a different route.

He went along leisurely, and it was nearly an hour later before he drew up at the end of the high board fence, and made his way quietly to the stable.

As he had surmised, the other horse was in his stall, and when he returned to the house, he found the window still unfastened as he had left it. The door was locked from the inside, proving that Garot had entered and gone up-stairs.

A minute later found Nick in Meggs' room. He listened and heard the Frenchman removing his clothing, preparatory to retiring for the balance of the night.

"He's a cool customer, after all," said Nick to himself.

"He thinks he has the box safe, and I imagine that was all he really wanted, outside, perhaps, of some cash if it was to be had.

"That box contains something that I will have to have a look at."

The more Nick thought of the matter, the more he became convinced that a revelation of the contents of the box would go a long way toward clearing up the mystery of Oscar Brownlie's murder.

The man had been put out of the world in no uncommon manner and for no uncommon reason.

There was a plot somewhere—a plot as deep as it was mysterious.

Shrewd and sharp as Garot was, Nick expected to easily obtain possession of the inlaid box.

In his stocking feet he tiptoed his way to the door of the adjoining bedchamber.

The irregular breathing inside told him that the occupant was asleep.

But how soundly was a question.

With his delicate pair of pincers, Nick

began to work at the key on the inner side of the lock.

To turn it noiselessly was a fine job, but at last it was accomplished.

He opened the door with equal care, and like a phantom glided into the room.

It was pitch-dark, but this just suited Nick.

The bed stood against the wall opposite. Near it was a chair, upon which hung the suit of clothing Garot had worn.

Nick felt over it and speedily found the inlaid box in an inner pocket of the coat.

There was also a small leather case, which, when the detective took it up, gave forth a peculiar sickening odor.

Curious to know what such a case could contain, Nick took that also.

With both articles in his hand, he started for the door.

As he did so Garot turned over on the bed and began to mutter in his sleep.

"Now, madame, we will see who will win," he sighed, and then went off into a more profound slumber than ever.

"That's so, we will see who will win," thought Nick, and glided as silently from the apartment as he had come.

Once in his own room, the inlaid box claimed his first attention.

He saw at a glance that it was an old and valuable affair, inlaid with pearls and gold.

There was neither key nor keyhole, and he rightfully concluded that it opened with a secret spring.

It took but a moment to find a little crack at one end, clearly indicated to Nick, who had seen the same device many times be-

fore, and inserting his finger nail in this, the lid of the box instantly flew back.

The box was crowded with papers, much creased and folded, as if they had been placed inside in a great hurry.

The first thing which interested Nick were several notes given by Babette Le Rue to Oscar Brownlie. The notes were long overdue, and there was nothing to show that any of them had been paid.

Next came several letters from the woman to the man in which she told of her love for him and acknowledged several gifts from him.

Then followed another letter asking why he did not keep his promise to marry her—that she cared nothing for that fool, Pierre Garot.

"That will make Garot feel good," thought Nick, as he smiled to himself. "I believe I see why he killed Brownlie."

"He was in love with Madame Le Rue and did it out of hatred for the man she had set her eyes upon."

"But where does Ralph Larchmond come in?"

"It may be possible that she is trying to blackmail him. She would have an excellent chance to do that if he was in the habit of calling at her gambling resort."

"He is a very sensitive fellow, and would endure almost anything rather than risk exposure, especially if behind it all there is some nice girl of whom he thinks a good deal."

Having examined the contents of the inlaid box, Nick put the notes and letters in his pocket.

Then he put several bits of newspaper in the box and closed it. •

"Now he can have the box and welcome," he thought, as he next gave his attention to the leather case, which he found contained a very fine hypodermic syringe such as is sometimes used to eject morphine into the system.

Besides the syringe, the case contained a small bottle, half filled with a reddish-brown mixture. It was this mixture which gave forth the peculiarly sickening odor from the case.

Nick concluded that this was the poison which had caused Oscar Brownlie's death. Exactly what it was he did not know, nor would he be able to find out until after a scientific analysis had been made.

Nick searched around the room until he found an empty cologne bottle.

Into this he poured the poison, and then re-filled the smaller bottle with water, coloring it with some of the paints he always carried for disguising his face.

This done, he went silently back to Garot's room, intending to put the inlaid box and the case where he had found them, as he was not through with the Frenchman yet, and wanted him to believe himself safe in possession of the stolen prize, as he was satisfied the villain would attempt to see Madame Le Rue again, and Nick wanted to hear any conversation which might pass between them.

The task had barely been accomplished when Nick heard a heavy step in the hall.

Instantly Pierre Garot was awakened. At the same moment Tooker appeared in the door-way, a lighted lamp in his hand.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER ON TOP.

"Hullo, Meggs, what are you doing in here?" demanded Tooker.

"A robber!" shrieked Garot. "My heavens! My inlaid box!"

The Frenchman leaped out of bed and made a dive for his clothing.

He gave a deep sigh of relief to find his box and the leather case safe.

"I say what are you doing in here?" demanded Tooker, again.

"That's all right, Tooker, I got in the wrong room in the dark," returned Nick.

"But I took you to bed long ago."

"I went down-stairs again for a drink."

"I thought I heard a noise down-stairs some time ago. That's why I dressed, to see what it was."

"I ain't feelin' well," went on Nick.

"Sorry I disturbed you," he added to Garot.

The Frenchman did not reply. He was busy dressing himself as speedily as possible.

"It ain't morning yet, Garot," remarked Tooker.

"I don't like him," was the short reply.

"Oh, Meggs is all right. He's one of the boys."

And Tooker tipped Garot the wink.

But Garot paid no heed. In a moment more he had finished his hasty toilet.

"I think I'll take a look in the barn," went on Tooker. "I don't want any one to skip out with my horses."

"I reckon I'll go back to my room again," replied Nick.

He had scarcely spoken, and turned to leave the room, when Garot came up behind

him and struck him a blow on the side of the head.

"What did you strike Meggs for?" cried Tooker.

"Maybe he is your friend, maybe he is a detective," hissed Garot. "Help me make him a prisoner, Tooker, till we make sure of this."

"A detective!"

"Yes. Help me, quick!"

"But how—by Jove, but he don't look like Meggs exactly, after all! You're dead right."

The road-house keeper had already placed the lamp on a side table near the door and now rushed to Garot's assistance.

The Frenchman's blow, coming so unexpectedly, had partly stunned Nick. Before he could resist, he was down on his back.

But he was not to be downed thus easily. He turned over like a flash and twisted out of the grasp of his assailant and to his feet.

Then Tooker closed in on him and for several minutes it was a hot fight of two against one.

"A detective, sure enough!" howled Tooker. "We must get the best of him, Garot."

Tooker was a powerful man, and the fear of what would happen should Nick escape from the place, lent additional strength to his muscular arms.

But, as we know, Nick's muscles are like steel, and he was well able to stand the punishment inflicted.

He landed a left-hander on Tooker's jaw that sent the man staggering up against the table.

There was a crash, and over went the piece of furniture, carrying the lamp with it.

Luckily, the light went out, otherwise the apartment would have been set on fire.

In the darkness, Nick felt somebody seize him from behind.

With a quick movement he backed his man against the wall.

The crash broke the plaster, and it also caved in two of the fellow's ribs.

A groan and an oath escaped him.

The voice was Tooker's, and swinging around, Nick caught the road-house keeper by the throat.

"Have you had enough?" he demanded.

"You have broken every rib in my body!" groaned Tooker. "Help me, Garot!"

There was no reply to this appeal.

Garot had taken time by the forelock and skipped out.

The murderer felt that Nick was after him and not after Tooker.

Tooker owned the place, and could not get away unless he sacrificed his property, which was not likely, and he had certainly been badly punished already.

Thus thought Nick, and leaving the wounded man to the care of his help, he darted out of the apartment.

It was very dark in the hall, and several persons from above and below were demanding to know what was the matter.

Knowing that the crowd would soon be after him, Nick hurried down-stairs and into the road.

In the dim light no one was to be seen, and whether Garot had left the vicinity or not he could not tell.

Running back to the stable, Nick pro-

cured one of the horses and turned the other into a field.

"He won't be able to get away so fast now," the detective reasoned to himself.

Several minutes passed, and a search about the house convinced Nick that Garot had undoubtedly left.

"Will he go to Washington?"

That was a difficult question to answer.

Undoubtedly Garot was by this time afraid of Madame Le Rue's place, and yet there was no telling what he might do, considering his relationship to the woman.

With all possible speed Nick rode to the nearest police station.

Here he left word concerning Tooker's ranch, and efforts were at once made to pull in every one connected with it.

This raid was highly successful, for by daylight Tooker and all of his hangers-on were in jail, and Aspen's stuff was recovered.

In the meantime Nick hurried off to the depot.

Here he made a number of inquiries and learned that a man who looked like a tramp had boarded the last Washington freight.

"How long ago?"

"Half an hour."

"When does the next train go out?"

"Not for a couple of hours."

This did not suit Nick at all.

From the description of the tramp, there was a good chance that he was Garot, who, no doubt, meant to see Madame Le Rue before the police had time to do anything.

Nick hunted up the station master.

"I must get to Washington without

delay," he said. "Have you an extra engine handy?"

"Who are you?"

"Nick Carter, the New York detective."

"A matter of business, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes."

"I'll see what I can do for you."

The man hurried off.

In ten minutes he returned.

"An engine will be at your service in five minutes," he announced.

The steam horse soon glided into the station, and Nick leaped on board.

The track was not clear all the way, and consequently they had to run with caution.

They reached Washington exactly ten minutes after the freight had arrived.

He was soon in a cab and bowling along swiftly in the direction of Madame Le Rue's ranch.

Nick felt that he was now on the last lap of the case, but that he must move with caution if he would gain sufficient evidence against Garot to convict the man and clear Ralph Larchmond.

As soon as the side road in the direction of Mt. Pleasant was reached, Nick leaped from the cab.

"Here is a five-dollar bill for you," he said to the driver. "Wait three hours for me."

"Yes, sir."

On reaching the old mansion the lower portion of the house was found to be in utter darkness.

The only light showing streamed from the windows of Madame Le Rue's private sitting-room, adjoining her bedchamber.

"That shows she is up," reasoned Nick.

"More than likely she has just had a call."

With his knife blade Nick unfastened one of the lower windows and entered the old mansion.

He had thrown aside his former disguise, and now he saw to it that his weapons were ready for use.

A moment more brought him to the door of Madame Le Rue's room. The voices from within told him that he had made no mistake, that only the madame and Garot were present.

"I do not understand you at all, Pierre," the madame was saying. "Why do you arouse me at this hour?"

"It is necessary, Babette. I must go away."

"What! To-night?"

"At once."

"Why?"

"The detectives are on my track."

The madame gave a slight scream.

"Where have you been?"

"I have taken a hurried trip to Baltimore."

"To Oscar Brownlie's house?"

"Yes."

"What did you get?"

Madame Le Rue was all attention.

"I got a box of papers out of that place I saw him put them in, the night I watched him."

"Let me have them at once. Are my notes safe? Is that confession there?"

"I haven't been able to open the box yet."

"I can open it. The old fool showed me how."

"Not so fast, Babette."

"Why do you keep me waiting, Pierre?"

"Because I want to come to an understanding."

"What kind of an understanding?"

"About Ralph Larchmond and about ourselves."

"Cannot you wait, Pierre? He is in prison."

"And you would help him to get out if he would marry you."

"Oh, don't be foolish, Pierre."

"I know you." The Frenchman muttered a curse. "You are not true to me. Look what I have done, too!"

"Ralph Larchmond loves another woman—a mere schoolgirl."

"Yes, and that is why he is in prison. He is afraid you will expose the fact that you had him call here—that he has been leading something of a double life."

"Who told you that?"

"Never mind—I have thought it all over. You wish to use me as a cat's-paw."

"No, no, dear Pierre."

As the madame spoke, she tried to throw her arms about the man's neck. But he shoved her back.

"I am not to be coaxed this time, Babette. I have run too much risk for you. You must kiss the cross and swear to marry me to-morrow."

"Pierre!"

"I will have no other way. Who was it did your foul work against Oscar Brownlie—made a friend of him only to kill him when he was least aware—to poison him as he dozed on the sofa in his library? It was myself, and I can still hear his voice as he

staggered up and cried out that he must have air. And I did it for your sake, and would have got the box that very night had some one not come into the room and made me lose my nerve."

The man was getting excited, and now he caught the woman by the wrist.

"When we came here you promised to marry me, Babette, and I did all I could to help you get rich. And then, fool that I was, I helped you to ensnare Oscar Brownlie. But you were not content. You must also ensnare his nephew, and now—now you would play me false, I can see it in your eyes!"

"Let me go, Pierre!"

"No! not unless you swear to marry me to-morrow and go away with me."

"I will not!"

"Babette!"

"I say I will not, so there! Now let me go."

With a half snarl, like a savage beast that has lost its prey, Garot hurled himself upon the woman. With one of his powerful arms he held her backwards over a chair.

"I thought so!" he hissed. "I am prepared. Look, I have the very syringé here which caused Oscar Brownlie's death, the syringe Ralph Larchmond bought, thinking it was to be used in treating his uncle's swollen knee. It is charged with the same deadly poison——"

"Have mercy, Pierre!"

"Why should I have mercy, Babette? I know you now in all your false-heartedness. You love money and Ralph Larchmond more than you do me. I felt it was so almost from the start. I believe at the bottom of

your heart you intended to help Larchmond escape the gallows by winding the thread of evidence around my throat—after you had forced him to give up his other love and turn to you."

"It is false! I—I—love you."

"Bah! such talk comes too late. Listen to me. The detective and myself have already had several encounters."

"What detective?"

"Ha! ha! as if you did not know! Why, the detective who is your hireling—the man who is to clear you and send me to the rope!"

Like a flash of lightning, Nick perceived what Garot was driving at.

The Frenchman thought Nick had been hired by Madame Le Rue to expose Garot whenever the proper moment arrived. He was likewise to shield the madame from all possible public connection with the case.

No one but an insanely jealous creature would have arrived at such a conclusion, but that was just what Garot was.

With all of his Gallic passion he had loved the madame for years, and now to see himself gradually thrust aside and used merely as a tool had fairly turned his brain.

With a fierce motion, he pierced the skin on the madame's bare arm and shoved upon the handle of the syringe.

She gave a scream of horror, and as she did so Nick burst into the room.

Garot turned, and for the instant was paralyzed with fright.

"Stand where you are, Garot!" commanded Nick, and covered the Frenchman with a pistol.

The man, wild with rage, thought to

resist. But a glance at the revolver held by a steady hand soon had its influence, and it became an easy matter to handcuff and subdue him.

In the meanwhile Madame Le Rue had thrown herself down on a couch. She thought she had been poisoned and that her end was near.

In the presence of half a dozen witnesses, among them two girls who had just come to work in the resort without knowing of its doubtful character, she made a full confession concerning the plot against Oscar Brownlie and Ralph Larchmond.

With the most important matters the reader is already familiar. Oscar Brownlie had been her dupe for years, and it was only when the old bachelor threatened to throw her over and expose her that she coaxed Garot into killing him.

She said she really loved Larchmond and would have tried to clear him, as Garot had intimated, had it come to the final pinch.

The confession finished, Nick told the woman she had nothing to fear, that she would not die, as the stuff in the syringe was harmless.

At this, Madame Le Rue's rage knew no bounds. She wished to tear Nick to pieces, and fairly went into a spasm when taken away to the Washington jail.

There is little more to tell. In due course of time Pierre Garot was hung for his great crime. Madame Le Rue was sentenced to prison, but died on her way there of heart failure. Tooker and Meggs will continue to serve the State of Maryland for several years to come.

Paul Becker was naturally delighted at

the work Nick Carter had done on this puzzling case, but it took some time to convince Ralph Larchmond that everything was for the best. After his release from prison, Larchmond took a trip to Europe. He is soon to be married, but whether or not it is to the schoolgirl of other days Nick has never taken the trouble to find out.

He had performed the work he had set out to do, and when Paul Becker came into possession of his property, he did not forget his obligation to Nick Carter.

THE END.

The next number will contain "Nick Carter's Double Header; or, The Ins and Outs of a Boston Sensation."

LATEST ISSUES.

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- 215—Nick Carter's Name at Stake; or, After the Sunset City Sharpers.
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- 213—A Swindler in Petticoats; or, Nick Carter's Pretty Prisoner.
- 212—The Wizard of the Cue; or, Nick Carter and the Pool Room Case.
- 211—Run Down in Toronto; or, Nick Carter's Work for a Friend.
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